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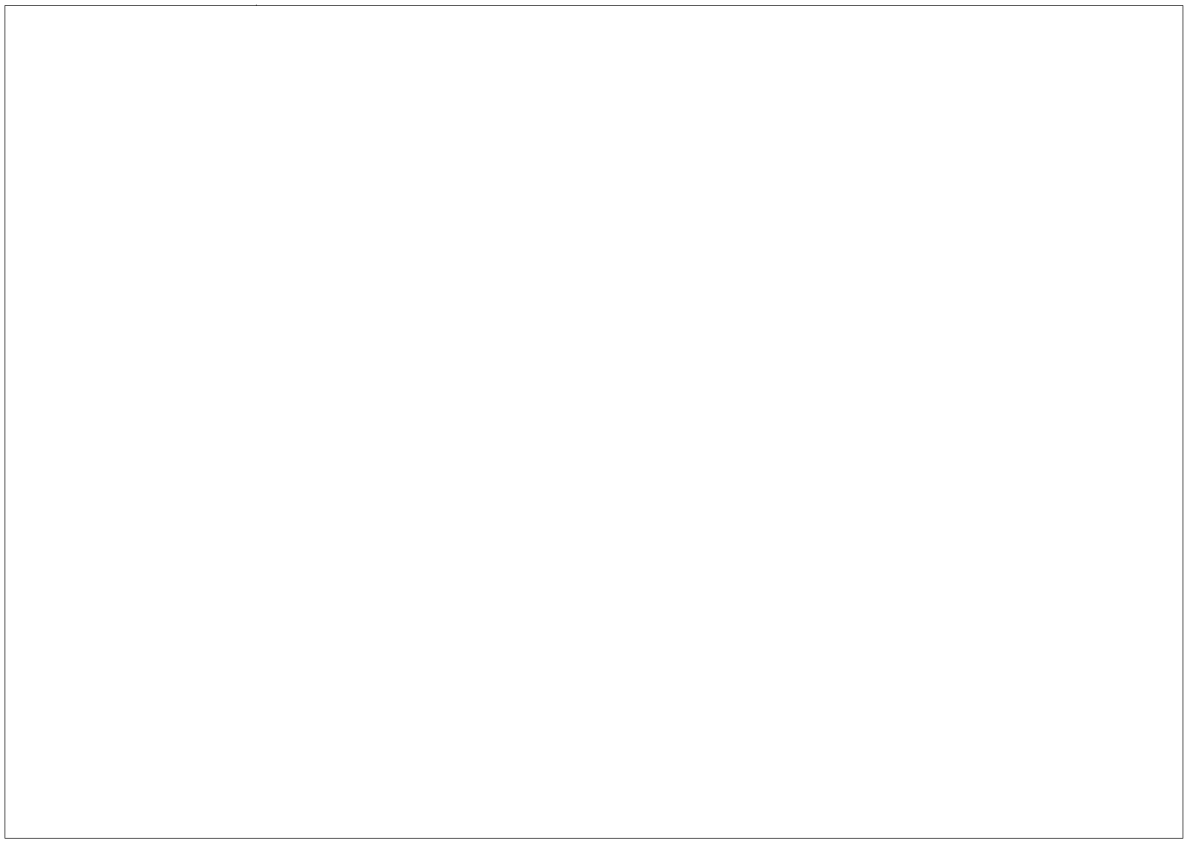

ARGENTINA: Peron's government registers modest victory in Misiones Province. (Page 18)

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ARGENTINA

President Peron's government won a modest victory in a provincial election last Sunday. The Peronist coalition's capture of the governorship of Misiones Province, despite the failure to obtain a legislative majority, has given the government a badly needed boost at a time when its policies are under increasing attack.

The most encouraging sign for Mrs. Peron's supporters was the severe overall defeat suffered by a splinter left-wing Peronist party backed by the Montonero guerrillas. Extreme leftist Peronists will probably point to the electoral drubbing as proof that violence is the only way for them to gain power.

The strong showing of the centrist Radical Party--which finished a close second--will disappoint those in the Peronist government who had hoped for a clear-cut victory. The large opposition turnout probably reflects a substantial protest vote against the government's policies. It could also represent a repudiation of the massive vote-buying by Social Welfare Minister Lopez Rega, who handed out millions of pesos in "subsidies" prior to the balloting. Radical Party gains will enhance the position of its leader, Ricardo Balbin, who has been under fire from some elements of his party for not taking a harder line against the government.

Ironically, the outcome of the Misiones test might temporarily restrain conservative critics of Lopez Rega within the Peronist labor movement and the military. They may have to admit grudgingly that the strategy of the President's chief adviser worked to contain the challenge from the dissident Peronist left, even if it did so at the expense of losing votes to the Radicals.

There is at least a fair chance that the government's success in its first test at the polls since Juan Peron's election in September 1973 will strengthen the hand of moderates, such as Interior Minister Rocamora, who have encouraged the President to adopt a more open and conciliatory approach in dealing with other

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political parties. Rocamora is a staunch advocate of close cooperation with opposition party leaders and has urged Mrs. Peron to hold elections in provinces in which the central government has intervened. There is no assurance, however, that the voices of moderation will be heeded by Mrs. Peron as long as Lopez Rega retains his dominant influence and ability to undercut other advisers.

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